

KEY ASKS UGANDA

Shrinking Civic Space and Political Repression



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Uganda is a vital regional actor and a major refugee host, but the January 2026 elections have triggered severe post-election repression. With President Museveni's four-decade rule continuing and his son, Gen.

Muhoozi Kainerugaba, expanding military influence over civilian life, democratic institutions are rapidly eroding. Despite strong economic growth and impending oil production, severe fiscal pressures and drastic humanitarian funding cuts threaten the country's stability and its progressive refugee-hosting model.

Why This Matters to U.S. Policy

As a key U.S. partner in East and Central Africa, Uganda's strategic value must not overshadow the urgent need to protect human rights and democratic governance. Prioritizing security ties while ignoring domestic repression risks undermining the very institutions required for Uganda's long-term stability and regional security.

BACKGROUND

Civic space has been shrinking for years, but the 2026 post-election militarized politics and succession uncertainties have accelerated democratic backsliding. While the economy is growing (6.3% GDP growth) with first oil production expected in late 2026, rising public debt and questions over oil revenue transparency pose significant risks. Furthermore, Uganda hosts two million refugees, but a severe funding shortfall is crippling food, health, and protection services, threatening social cohesion.

Political and Security Developments

- **Targeting of Opposition:** Dr. Kizza Besigye faces treason charges and repeated hospitalizations due to poor health in detention. His legal team faces intimidation, and his co-counsel has been barred from entering the country.
- **Media Crackdowns:** In June 2026, Gen. Kainerugaba ordered the military shutdown of Nation Media Group outlets and issued arrest orders for its Managing Director, forcing her to go into hiding.
- **Abductions:** In July 2026, security forces unlawfully abducted opposition politician Muwanga Kivumbi after he was granted bail, holding him without legal safeguards.

Human Rights and Humanitarian Situation

Since the January 2026 elections, security forces have killed at least 16 people, arbitrarily arrested hundreds, and imposed a nationwide internet shutdown. Over 50 opposition leaders, journalists, and human rights defenders have faced abuse. Authorities suspended at least 10 prominent civil society organizations ahead of the elections. The systematic use of torture enforced disappearances, and military courts against civilians continues to destroy public trust in the rule of law.

Key Policy Issues

1. Shrinking Media Freedom: Repressive laws (e.g., the Computer Misuse Act) are weaponized to detain and harass journalists for information deemed "offensive" by the state.
2. Militarization of Civilian Life: The 2025 UPDF Amendment Bill unconstitutionally allows military courts to try civilians, while Gen. Kainerugaba's role expands into civilian law enforcement.
3. Disregard for the Rule of Law: The abrupt closure of CSOs, media stations, and the detention of opposition leaders blatantly violate the constitution.
4. Oil Governance & Refugee Pressures: Looming oil production requires strict transparency and environmental safeguards, while severe funding gaps threaten the refugee-hosting model.

KEY ASKS U.S. GOVERNMENT

1. Demand Accountability & Due Process: Publicly and consistently raise concerns regarding political repression. Demand the immediate release of unfairly detained activists, journalists, and opposition supporters, and ensure access to legal representation.
2. Condition Security Cooperation: Ensure all U.S. security assistance prioritizes humanitarian, development, and other non-securitized/militarized assistance over security assistance so that regional-security cooperation does not enable domestic repression.
3. Protect Civic Space & Defenders: Provide financial, technical, and protection support to independent civil society, human rights defenders, women-led organizations, and pro-democracy actors.
4. Sustain Humanitarian & Economic Integrity: Increase support for refugees and host communities, while promoting transparency, environmental safeguards, and equitable revenue use as Uganda enters oil production.

KEY ASKS

UNITED NATIONS AND DIPLOMATIC MISSIONS

1. **Condemn Repression & Demand Investigations:** Publicly condemn attacks on civic space and call for independent, impartial investigations into unlawful killings, abductions, and torture by security agencies.
2. **Reinforce Civilian Rule & Inclusive Governance:** Use multilateral engagement to protect constitutional governance and ensure women, youth, faith leaders, and marginalized groups have meaningful roles in peacebuilding.
3. **Sustain Refugee Burden-Sharing:** Mobilize international support to fund Uganda's refugee response and strengthen conflict-prevention diplomacy addressing regional displacement spillovers.
4. **Apply Targeted Consequences:** Consider targeted sanctions, travel bans, and asset freezes against individuals credibly implicated in serious human rights abuses and attacks on democratic institutions.

KEY ASKS

RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES AND CIVIL SOCIETY

1. **Amplify Voices & Condemn Abuses:** Publicly denounce democratic backsliding and use public forums, media, and advocacy campaigns to amplify the voices of Ugandan victims, journalists, and defenders.
2. **Advocate for Stronger U.S. Action:** Urge the U.S. Government and Congress to take a firm stance against human rights violations, including supporting timebound sanctions against individuals responsible for serious abuses.
3. **Provide Protection & Emergency Aid:** Support emergency assistance and protection programs for human rights defenders, journalists, and organizations facing threats, harassment, or persecution.
4. **Build Solidarity Coalitions:** Unite faith-based organizations, human rights groups, democracy advocates, and diaspora communities to coordinate global advocacy on Uganda.

ABOUT THE CONVENERS

The American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) Salama Hub and the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC) jointly implement the Horn of Africa Research and Advocacy Joint Project, an initiative established to respond to the complex and evolving peace and security challenges facing the Horn of Africa. The project convenes a diverse coalition of civil society organizations, faith leaders from multiple religious traditions, women and youth-led movements, and academic institutions to promote collaborative research and advocacy on peace and security in the Horn of Africa.

Through this partnership, AFSC and AACC work to address the root causes of violent conflict, militarization, shrinking civic and democratic space, and the humanitarian crises affecting communities across the region. By fostering inclusive dialogue, supporting locally led solutions, and amplifying the voices of affected communities in key policy and advocacy forums, including the United Nations, African Union, and United States Government, the project seeks to advance sustainable peace throughout the Horn of Africa.

ABOUT AFSC

The American Friends Service Committee, AFSC, is a 109-year Quaker international NGO (1917-2026) and a co-recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize on behalf of all Quakers (1947). AFSC promotes a world free of violence, inequality, and oppression. We work with people and partners worldwide of all faiths and backgrounds to meet urgent community needs, challenge injustice, and build peace. AFSC is particularly active in the Horn of Africa, where we have created the Salama Hub, a research and advocacy program for peace and stability.

The AFSC's Salama Hub, a research and advocacy program, works for peace and stability in the Horn of Africa by strengthening local civil society organizations and faith leaders in influencing policies from research. It also fosters community-led healing and reconciliation. What makes it unique is its African-led research, that connects issues from the communities to the policy level. The program presents an opportunity for civil society organizations (CSOs) and faith-based organizations (FBOs) capacities to be strengthened. The program works with a wide range of partners—from local groups to regional and international bodies like the African Union, IGAD, European Union, and the U.S. policymakers—to ensure these local insights directly influence policies and social dynamics.

ABOUT AACC

The All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC) is a continental ecumenical body that accounts for over 200 million Christians across the African continent. AACC is the largest association of Protestant, Anglican, Orthodox, and Indigenous churches in Africa, and a member of the worldwide ecumenical network. As an ecumenical body, AACC is a fellowship of more than 215 members comprising of Churches, National Christian Councils (NCCs), theological and lay training institutions, and other Christian organizations in 43 African countries.

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